Social Scientist

Myth and Reality of Ramayana and Mahabharata
Author(s): Sharad Patil
Source: *Social Scientist*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (Mar., 1976), pp. 68-72
Published by: Social Scientist

DISCUSSION

Myth and Reality of Ramayana and Mahabharata

IF THE controversy over Ramayana started with the article, "How Old Is the Ramayana?" by H D Sankalia in *The Times of India* dated 26 November 1974 which was a preliminary summary of a series of lectures to be delivered at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, the controversy over Mahabharata was touched off by D C Sircar of Calcutta. Scholars are divided mainly into two camps: the first comprising of the orthodox and the second of the archaeologists. The former place the story of Rama between 2850 BC and 1950 BC and the great battle of the Bharatas in 1416 BC while the latter date both the epics not earlier than 1000 BC and 850 BC respectively.

The datelines arrived at after C-14 examinations can hardly be questioned except on the basis of orthodoxy and exclusive reliance on literary sources. But the latter side is not free from its own prejudices and exclusive reliance on archaeology. If Sircar thinks Mahabharata as a whole to be a myth, Sankalia avers that "even much of the critical edition is a myth, but it does contain a kernel of truth which archaeology alone can reveal." But can archaeology rescue all the most essential materials from ravages of time and can they speak? And how can such archaic societies as those of the matriarchal Khasis and the matilineal Malayalis which have come down to modern times be explained on the basis of these rigid archaeological datelines?

Sankalia contends that the Mahabharata war was at best "a family feud" which "broke out between the members of the Kuru family" and was joined by "other rulers." It is true that the account of akshauhinis is an exaggerated one, but to reduce it to a family feud is hardly a historical way of elucidating the episode. Family as an institution we see arising only in the period of Buddha and that too in the new non-tribal kingdoms of Kosala, Magadha, Vatsa and Avanti, while the rest of India was covered by tribes, tribal kingdoms and tribal republics or oligarchies *Kecid desa gana-adhinah, kecid raja-adhinah*).The primary unit of these tribal

societies was still a clan or *kula (Kulanam samuhas tuganah samparikirtitah).* When the Mallas of Kusinara came to offer their last homage to the dying Buddha, Ananda introduced them not family-wise but clan-wise (*"Yan nuna aham Kosinarake Malle kula-parivattaso kula-parivattaso thapetva Bhagavantam vandapeyyam."*)

What is the basic difference between a clan and a family? First, the former belongs to the period of classlessness and tribal slavery, while the latter belongs to the feudal period. Secondly, Manu lays down that not only the partition of property but also of (joint) family should take place in every fifth generation (IX. 186-187). In contradistinction to this a clan was comprised of seven generations. Ehrenfels says that a clan in Kerala used to split up as soon as its members numbered more than a hundred. Hence we can take the average number of the members of a clan to be fifty. When the ruling clan of the Kuru tribe numbered more than a hundred it led to the splitting up of the clan into the two clans of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Grammatical literature tells us that the tribal confederation of the Tri-gartas was constituted of six phratries *(vargas)*, and the tribe of the Salvas was also comprised of phratries (*avayavas*), one of which, the Udumbara, was made up of four clans. The Sabha-parva (14.35,56) mentions that the Yadava oligarchy had eighteen clans. The tribal council of the Sakya oligarchy, which was one of the smallest oligarchies of the time, consisted of 500 Khattiyas, and that of the Yaudheyas of later period: 5000. The Licchavi oligarchs numbered 7707, while the population of their capital Vaisali was 1,68,000. A tribal council, it should be noted, consisted only of the elected elders of a tribe while all those initiated with that tribe's *sāmskara* constituted the full members of a tribe. Hence, we can surmise that an average tribe could put forth at least 1000 adult males in the event of war, a tribe being a self-acting armed force, that is all its adult males constituted its army.

Family Feud or Tribal War?

Now, how many were the tribes that took part in the great Bharata war? The earliest great war to be mentioned by Rigveda VII-18 is the war of ten kings, a war in which at least ten tribes participated. The hymns enumerate them as follows: 1) Tritsu, 2) Bharata, 3) Parsu, 4) Turvasa, 5) Drihyu, 6) Puru, 7) Anu, 8) Matsya, 9) Paktha, 10) Bhalanas, 11) Alina, 12) Vishanin, and so on. The battle fought out on the banks of the Parushni or the Yamuna must have fielded at least 10,000 warriors. As for the Mahabharata battle, which was far bigger than the Rigvedic one, even if we exclude the inflated number of tribes that are supposed to have participated in it, we can safely include 1) Kuru, 2) Gandhara, 3) Bahlika, 4) Sindhu, 5) Madra, 6) Avanti, 7) Puru, 8) Kosala, (9) Pragjyotisha, 10) Anga, and 11) Alambusha, who fought on the side of the Kauravas: 1) Pandava, 2) Pancala, 3) Matsya, 4) Hidimba, 5) Magadha, 6) Cedi, and 7) Kasi, fought on the Pandava side. Thus, at least eighteen tribes fought on both sides; hence, the

minimum number that fought on Kurukshetra should have been 18,000. Taking into consideration the population of north India of that period, it was definitely the greatest war of that age.

The other reason given by Sankalia for reducing the war to a family feud is that it being a heroic Iron Age like that of the Greeks of the epic period there could not be any indiscriminate fights but only duels (*dvandvas*). This conception is a logical corollary of the 'family outlook.' Duels were parts of *sam-kula* (fight between two or more clans) skirmishes. A warrior who fought in a chariot (*rathi*) always moved in a prescribed formation by which he was flanked on both sides by supporting *rathis (cakra-rakshakas)* and followed by his platoon of infantry. That is why an attempt was always made to isolate a redoubtable *rathi* from his covering formation in order to kill him. The Vedic term for tribal assembly and war is *sam-grama*. The word itself denotes that a tribe gathered for its tribal assembly and went to war clan-wise. The Vedic word for enemy is *a-mitra*, meaning an alien tribesman or a foe of a tribe as a whole.

The present versions of both the epics being the products of quite a late period their sequence also is a matter of controversy. Both the epics make mention of iron. Hence, it is contended that Ramayana took place after Mahabharata. The anteriority of Ramayana vis a vis Mahabharata cannot be proved conclusively on the basis of tradition, literary or otherwise. The issue can be clinched only by examining the societies represented by the epics.

Conflict in the Ramayana

Right up to the time of the abduction of Sita the main conflict in Ramayana is between the priest-kingly *(rajarshi)* monarchical tribal states of the Kosalas and the matriarchal tribal states such as the Malada-Karusha ruled by the Yakshi Tataka and the Jana-sthana ruled by the Rakshasi Surpanakha (*one having nails like winnowing baskets)*. The Asuras, Daityas, Danavas, Rakshasas, Yakshas, Gandharvas and so on are always bracketed together as Nairritas, meaning the progeny of Nirriti, the primal mother goddess of the pre-Aryan Indus civilization. They were either matriarchal or matrilineal. The final struggle in the epic was between the patriarchal theocratic monarchical system represented by Rama and the matrilineal theocratic monarchical system represented by Ravana. The bone of contention was Sita. If she was just an individual princess or a queen, why was she called a daughter of the Earth Mother? It means that she was an institution individualized by Valmiki. If A-halya, literally meaning land not ploughed but sown by a hoe *(sphya)*, was the much-maligned high priestess and tribal mother of the Videhas, Sita, literally meaning ploughed and cultivated land, was the daughter and heir of Ahalya. With the patriachal priest-kingship of the Janakas (literally meaning 'begetter' in the original derogatory sense) the Sita temple land *(kata)* became the crown land, the private property of the Janaka dynasty. Later the ruling Janaka disposed of Sita in a patrilochal marriage and with the marriage the institution of

crown land (*temenos* in Greek) was adopted by Rama. The climaxing conflict between Rama and Ravana denotes the adoption of the crown land institution by the advanced non-Aryan tribal monarchies. The exit of Sita into the nether world ruled by her Earth Mother signifies the final triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy.

Marching on to Mahabharata

Mahabharata is the continuation and culmination of this epoch. The main adversaries of the epic were born as cousins in the royal clan of the Kuru tribe. With the marriage of the Pandavas with Draupadi and their resulting alliance with the Pancala tribe, the Pandavas became a separate tribe and established a separate tribal kingdom at Indraprastha. The Kauravas were fierce patriarchs. While Gandhari was a living corpse, the wives of Duryodhana and Karna were but shadows. In contrast to this Kunti and Draupadi were full-blooded and imperious women who dominate the epic to the end. The Gandharva Chitraratha addressed Arjuna as Tapatya, a descendant of Tapati, a form of Surya Savitri or Earth Mother. The river Tapti was called Tapati in Sanskrit. The dialect of Khandesh still pronounces her as mother Tapati. It seems that the original home of the Pandavas was in the Tapti valley.

When the final duel between Karna and Arjuna,the mightiest heroes of the warring sides, took place, the poet says that the patriarchal Aditya deities ranged themselves on the side of Karna while the Earth Mother stood on the side of Arjuna. Thus it was again a strife between a patriarchal slave monarchy and a matrilineal slave monarchy. But a totally new factor had entered into this strife. It was the first ever and nascent non-monarchical slave republic or oligarchy of the Tadavas which had arisen on the corpse of the priest-kingly slave monarchy of Kamsa. Krishna, the architect and and leader of this highest form of slave society in India which came to be called sangha-gana in Buddha's time, played off the tribal monarchies—deadly enemies of the new social formation—against each other in order to weaken them. It is through this poineering role and his consummate statecraft that he was able to guide, with prowess that seemed superhuman, the main developments of the titanic conflict successfully without embroiling his oligarchy in it. The decimating war resulted in decisively weakening the monarchical slave system all over north India, enabling the rise of non-monarchical slave oligarchies.

Buddha, the supreme product of this sangha-gana system, described it as consisting of only two *varnas*,the Kshatriyas and the Dasa-karmakaras (*"Yona-Kambojesu annesu ca paccantimesu janapadesu dveva vanna-ayyo ceva dasoca."*) The class system of masters and slaves at last coincided with the varna system. But the Kshatriya masters lived among themselves a life of equality and collectivity instead of the hypergamous equality of the higher three *varnas* of the priests-kingly tribal stages, a life which they denied, as of old, to their slaves (*"Jatya can sadrisah sarve kulena sadrisas tatha"*(Santi-parva,107.30). Krishna the poineer of this sangha-gana system

which combined equality by birth and slavery by birth in its most developed form, later became the supreme and the most popular god of India whose philosophy of transcendental salvation *(Bhakti-yoga)* combined in itself the non-Braminical *Sankhya* dualism and the Brahminical monist idealism *(Brahma-vada)*.

The two epics thus depict the following social formations: (1)classless, later matriarchal *(Stri-rajya)* tribal states with which the two-varna (Kshatra and Brahma) system arose; (2) tribal slave states ruled by matrilineal monarchies with which the three-varna (Kshatriya, Brahmin and Dasa) and class system arose; (3) tribal slave states ruled by patriarchal monarchies with which the four-varna (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra) system arose;(4)non-monarchical slave oligarchies or sangha-ganas with which the two varna system coinciding with class system arose and which in its period of decadence developed *jati* system in the shell of *varna* system.

A deep study of our ancient literature with the help of the sciences of archaeology. and its interpretation with the comparative method can alone provide a satisfactory solution to the heated controversies raging over our history, ancient and medieval.

[Based on the author's forthcoming book, Dasa-Sudra Slavery and Feudalism and Their Philosophies.*]*

SHARAD PATIL